
UNIT 29 PEASANT AND TRIBAL UPRISINGS

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29.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit you will get to know:

- the background to the tribal and peasant movements which took place before 1857,
- the issues around which these uprisings took place, and
- the nature of popular participation and mobilization in these uprisings.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

Earlier in this course we have studied the process of establishment of colonial rule in India and the transformation that came with it in the field of economy, law, administration and other spheres of life. What was the reaction of the common people to this new Raj and the changes that it brought? Was the revolt of 1857 an isolated event or was it preceded by protest movements of like nature? An attempt has been made in this Unit to show how the peasants and tribes reacted to alien rule in the late 18th and 19th centuries, till 1857. This Unit covers some major peasant and tribal uprisings and the origins and character of such uprisings.

29.2 PEASANT AND TRIBAL UPRISINGS: ORIGINS

In pre-colonial India popular protest against the Mughal rulers and their officials was not uncommon. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed many peasant uprisings against the ruling class. Imposition of a high land revenue demand by the state, corrupt practices and harsh attitude of the tax collecting officials, were some of the many reasons which provoked the peasants to rise in revolt. However, the establishment of colonial rule in India and the various policies of the colonial government had a much more devastating effect on the Indian peasants and tribes. In Block 4 we have discussed in detail how the Indian economy was transformed by the British to suit the East India Company's needs and to enlarge the profits of their own countrymen. Some of the changes in Indian economy brought during this period were:

- Promotion of British manufactured goods in Indian markets leading to destruction of Indian handloom and handicraft industries.

- Huge transfer of wealth from India to England (Drain of Wealth).
- British land revenue settlements, a heavy burden of new taxes, eviction of peasants from their lands, encroachment on tribal lands.
- growth and strengthening of exploitation in rural society along with the growth of intermediary revenue collectors and tenants and money-lenders.
- Expansion of British revenue administration over tribal territories leading to the loss of tribal people's hold over agricultural and forest land.

The overall impact of these changes on the peasant and tribal society was very destructive. The appropriation of peasants surplus by the company and its agents, the increasing burden of taxes made the peasants completely dependant on the mercy of the revenue intermediaries and officials, the merchants and the money-lenders. Moreover, the destruction of indigenous industry led to migration of large scale workers from industry to agriculture. The pressure on land increased but the land revenue and agricultural policy of the government allowed little scope for the improvement of Indian agriculture.

While the British economic policy led to pauperization and impoverishment of the Indian peasantry, the British administration turned a deaf ear to the peasants grievances. British law and judiciary did not aid the peasantry; it safeguarded the interest of the government and its collaborators—the landlords, the merchants and the money-lenders. Thus being the prey of colonial exploitation and being deprived of justice from the colonial administration the peasants took up arms to protect themselves. The grievances of the tribal people were not different from those of the peasants. But what made them more aggrieved was the encroachment by outsiders into their independent tribal polity.

29.3 SOME IMPORTANT UPRISINGS

The simmering discontent of the peasants and tribal people broke out into popular uprisings in different parts of India at different points of time in the first hundred years of British rule. Whatever may be the immediate cause of each uprising by and large these protest movements were moulded by a shared experience of oppression in various forms, including colonial oppression. We would discuss in brief some of the important uprisings of this period.

29.3.1 The Sanyasi Rebellion, 1763-1800

The East India Company's official correspondence in the second half of the eighteenth century referred many times to the incursion of the nomadic Sanyasis and Fakirs, mainly in northern Bengal. Even before the great famine of Bengal (1770) small groups of Hindu and Muslim holymen travelled from place to place and made sudden attacks on the store houses of food crops and property of the local richmen and government officials. Though the Sanyasis and Fakirs were religious mendicants, originally they were peasants, including some who were evicted from land. However, the growing hardship of the peasantry, increasing revenue demand and the Bengal famine of 1770 brought a large number of dispossessed small Zamindars, disbanded soldiers and rural poor into the bands of Sanyasis and Fakirs. They moved around different parts of Bengal and Bihar in bands of 5 to 7 thousand and adopted the guerilla technique of attack. Their target of attack was the grain stocks of the rich and at later stage, government officials. They looted local government treasuries. Sometimes the wealth looted was distributed among the poor. They established an independent government in Bogra and Mymensingh. The contemporary government records describe these insurrections in their own way, thus:

“A set of lawless banditti known under the name of Sanyasis and Fakirs, have long infested these countries and under the pretence of religious pilgrimage, have been accustomed to traverse the chief parts of Bengal, begging, stealing and plundering wherever they go and as it best suits their convenience to practice. In the years subsequent to the famine, their ranks were swollen by a crowd of starving peasants, who had neither seed nor implements to recommence cultivation with, and the cold weather of 1772 brought them down upon the harvest fields of lower Bengal, burning, plundering, ravaging in bodies of fifty to thousand men.”



1. Sanyasi Rebels: A Sketch

One noticeable feature of these insurrections was the equal participation of Hindus and Muslims in it. Some of the important leaders of these movements were Manju Shah, Musa Shah, Bhawani Pathak and Debi Chaudhurani. Encounter between the Sanyasis-Fakirs and the British forces became a regular feature all over Bengal and Bihar till 1800. The British used its full force to suppress the rebels.

29.3.2 Peasant Uprising of Rangpur, Bengal, 1783

The establishment of British control over Bengal after 1757 and their various land revenue experiments in Bengal to extract as much as possible from peasants brought unbearable hardship for the common man. Rangpur and Dinajpur were two of the districts of Bengal which faced all kinds of illegal demands by the East India Company and its revenue-contractors. Harsh attitude of the revenue contractors and their exactions became a regular feature of peasant life. One such revenue contractor was Debi Singh of Rangpur and Dinajpur. He and his agents created a reign of terror in the two districts of northern Bengal. Taxes on the Zamindars were increased which actually were passed on from Zamindars to cultivators or ryots. Ryots were not in a position to meet the growing demands of Debi Singh and his agents. Debi Singh and his men used to beat and flog the peasants, burn their houses and destroy their crops and not even women were spared.

Peasants appealed to the company officials to redress their grievances. Their appeal however remained unheeded. Being deprived of justice the peasants took the law in their own hands. By beat of drum the rebel peasants gathered large number of peasants, armed with swords, shields, bows and arrows. They elected Dirjinarain as their leader and attacked the local cutcheries and store houses of crops of local agents of the contractors and government officials. In many cases they snatched away the prisoners from the government guards. The rebels formed a government of their own, stopped payments of revenue to the existing government and levied 'insurrection charges' to meet the expenses of the rebellion. Both Hindus and Muslims fought side by side in the insurrection. Ultimately the government's armed forces took control of the situation and suppressed the revolt.

29.3.3 The Uprising of the Bhils, 1818-31

The Bhils were mostly concentrated in the hill ranges of Khandesh. The British occupation of Khandesh in 1818 enraged the Bhils because they were suspicious of outsiders' incursion into their territory. Moreover, it was believed that Trimbakji, rebel minister of Bajji Rao II, instigated the Bhils against the British occupation of Khandesh. There was a general insurrection in 1819 and the Bhils in several small

groups ravaged the plains. There were similar types of insurrection quite often by the Bhil chiefs against the British. The British government used its military force to suppress the rebels and at the same time tried to win them over through various conciliatory measures. But the British measures failed to bring the Bhils to their side.

29.3.4 The Rebellion at Mysore, 1830-31

After the final defeat of Tipu Sultan the British restored Mysore to the Wodeyar ruler and imposed on him the subsidiary alliance. The financial pressure from the company on the Mysore ruler compelled him to increase revenue demands from the Zamindars. The increasing burden of revenue ultimately fell on the cultivators. The corruption and extortion of local officials added to the existing miseries of the peasants.

The growing discontent of the peasants broke out into an open revolt in the province of Nagar, one of the four divisions of Mysore. Peasants from other provinces joined the rebellious peasants of Nagar and the rebel peasants found their leader in Sardar Malla, the son of a common ryot of Kremasi. The peasants defied the authority of the Mysore ruler. The British force regained control of Nagar from the rebel peasants after strong opposition and ultimately the administration of the country passed into the hands of the British.

29.3.5 The Kol Uprising, 1831-32

The Kols of Singhbhum for long centuries enjoyed independent power under their chiefs. They successfully resisted all attempts made by the Raja of Chota Nagpur and Mayurbhanj to subdue them. British penetration into this area and the attempt to establish British law and order over the jurisdiction of the Kol Chiefs generated tensions among the tribal people.

As a result of British occupation of Singhbhum and the neighbouring territories, a large number of people from outside began to settle in this area which resulted in transfer of tribal lands to the outsiders. This transfer of tribal lands and coming of merchants, money-lenders and the British law in the tribal area posed a great threat to the hereditary independent power of the tribal chiefs. This created great resentment among the tribal people and led to popular uprisings against the outsiders in the tribal area. The rebellion spread over Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau and Manbhum. The target of attack was the settlers from other regions whose houses were burnt, and property looted. The insurrection was ruthlessly suppressed by the British militia.

29.3.6 The Faraizi Disturbances, 1838-51.

The Faraizi sect was founded by Haji Shariatullah of Faridpur. Originally Faraizi movement was fuelled by the grievances of rack-rented and evicted peasants against landlords and British rulers. The Faraizis under Dudu Miyan, the son of the founder of the sect, became united as a religious sect with an egalitarian ideology. His simple way of teaching and belief that all men are equal and land belongs to god and no one has right to levy tax on it appealed to the common peasants. The Faraizis set up parallel administration in some parts of Eastern Bengal and established village courts to settle the peasants disputes. They protected cultivators from Zamindar's excesses and asked the peasants not to pay taxes to the Zamindars. They raided the Zamindars' houses and cutcheries and burnt indigo factory at Panch-char. The government and Zamindars' forces crushed the movement and Dudu Miyan was imprisoned.

29.3.7 The Mappila Uprisings, 1836-54

Among the various peasant uprisings that posed serious challenge to the colonial rule the Mappila uprisings of Malabar occupy an important place. Mappilas are the descendants of the Arab settlers and converted Hindus. Majority of them were cultivating tenants, landless labourers, petty traders and fishermen. The British occupation of Malabar in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the consequent changes that the British introduced in the land revenue administration of the area brought unbearable hardship in the life of the Mappilas. Most important change was the transfer of 'Janmi' from that of traditional, partnership with the Mappila to that of an independent owner of land and the right of eviction of Mappila tenants which did not exist earlier. Over-assessment, illegal taxes, eviction from land, hostile attitude of

government officials were some of the many reasons that made the Mappilas rebel against the British and the landlords.

The religious leaders played an important role in strengthening the solidarity of the Mappilas through socio-religious reforms and also helped in the evolution of anti-British consciousness among the Mappilas. The growing discontent of the Mappilas broke out in open insurrections against the state and landlords. Between 1836 and 1854 there were about twenty-two uprisings in Malabar. In these uprisings the rebels came mostly from the poorer section of the Mappila population. The targets of the rebels were generally the British officials, Janmis and their dependents. The British armed forces swung into action to suppress the rebels but failed to subdue them for many years.

29.3.8 The Santhal Rebellion, 1855-56

The Santhals were inhabitants of the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Murshidabad, Pakur, Dumka, Bhagalpur and Purnea. The area of maximum concentration of Santhals was called Daman-i-koh or Santhal Pargana. When the Santhals cleared the forest and started cultivation in this area the neighbouring Rajas of Maheshpur and Pakur leased out the Santhal villages to Zamindars and money-lenders. Gradual penetration by outsiders (called dikus by the Santhals) in the territory of the Santhals brought misery and oppression for the simple living Santhals. In *Calcutta Review* of 1856 a contemporary writer depicted the condition of the Santhals in the following words:

“Zamindars, the police, the revenue and court alas have exercised a combined system of extortions, oppressive exactions, forcible dispossession of property, abuse and personal violence and a variety of petty tyrannies upon the timid, and yielding Santhals. Usurious interest on loans of money ranging from 50 to 500 per cent; false measures at the haat (weekly market) and the market; wilful and uncharitable trespass by the rich by means of their untethered cattle, tattoos (small ponies), ponies and even elephants, on the growing crops of the poorer race; and such like illegalities have been prevalent.”



2. Tilka Majhi: A Santhal Rebel

The oppression by money-lenders, merchants, Zamindars and government officials forced the Santhals to take up arms in order to protect themselves. Initial protests of the Santhals were in the form of robbery and looting of Zamindars and money-lenders houses. But violent suppression of these activities and harassment of Santhals at the hands of police and local officials made them more violent. The rebel Santhals found their leaders in two brothers, Sidhu and Kanu, who were believed to have received blessings from the gods to put an end to the ongoing oppression of the Santhals and to restore "the good old days". Several thousand Santhals armed with their traditional weapons of bows, arrows, axes assembled and took the decision to give an ultimatum to the Zamindars and the government officials to stop oppression immediately. They decided to get back control of their lands and to set up their own government. The authorities however paid no serious attention to this ultimatum. Ultimately the grievances of the Santhals flared up in open armed insurrection against the local government officials, Zamindars and money-lenders. The insurrection spread rapidly in the whole Santhal Pargana. Large numbers of low caste non-Santhals also came out in support of the Santhals. The government and Zamindars started counter-attacking the insurgents. The heroic struggle of the Santhals ultimately failed because of British superiority of arms.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Can you point out some general reasons for the peasant and tribal uprising in this period? Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) What was Dudu Miyan's message to the Bengal peasantry? Answer in 5 lines.

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**29.4 NATURE OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS
BEFORE 1857**

Peasant and tribal movements have been interpreted differently by different schools of historians. The historians with sympathies towards the British and the established order often regarded these uprisings as a problem of law and order. The range of problems faced by these tribals and peasants from the pre-colonial to the colonial times (see above) were often overlooked as possible causes for these uprisings. The rebels were often portrayed as primitive savages resisting "civilization". The Nationalists tended to appropriate the peasant the tribal history to the purposes of the anti-colonial struggle ignoring certain other facets of the oppressed people's struggle. Those more sympathetic to the cause of the tribals and peasants however, tended to negate very often the logic of peasant and tribal protest in terms of the people's own experience. It is also necessary to understand the domain of peasant and tribal action in its own terms. This effort has scarcely begun yet.

29.4.1 Leadership

In the movements we have studied above the question of leadership, i.e., who led these movements becomes important. Movements in this phase of our history tended to throw up leaders who rose and fell with the movement. The context in which these movements arose gave very little scope for a leadership to make an entry from outside the immediate context of the rebellion. This is quite in contrast to the times of the national movement where leaders from various sections of upper strata consciously, on certain ideological premises, made an intervention into the peasant and tribal movements.

The leadership of these movements often devolved upon men or women who were within the cultural world of the peasants they led. They were able to articulate the protest of the oppressed. The Faraizi rebellion illustrated how holymen as leaders were on the one hand trying to return to a past purity of their religion and on the other, also addressed the peasants problems. Thus the notion that all land was god's land the everyone had an equal share in it, mobilised the oppressed peasants and also invoked the sanctity of 'true' religion.

29.4.2 Participation and Mobilization

Some features of the peasant and tribal protest movements demonstrate a certain level of political and social consciousness. For example, it has been pointed out that the rebels against Debi Sinha in 1783 attacked **Kacharis** in a definite recognition of where the political source of the peasant's oppression lay. Similarly the Kols in 1832 did not attack the tribal population in a clear recognition of who their allies were. In course of the development of a movement it sometimes broadened its ambit to include issues beyond the immediate grievances which started off a protest movement. For example the Moplah rebellions in the nineteenth century Malabar started as struggles against the landlord but ended up as protest against British rule itself. Protest of the oppressed also often involved redefinition of the relationship of the oppressed to the language, culture and religion of the dominant classes. This may take the form of denial of the convention of respect and submission in speech or the destruction of places of worship or of symbols of domination or oppression. Thus protests took myriad forms in many spheres, from everyday life to organised insurgency.

In so far as protest movements, took on the character of public and collective acts, the peasants and tribal participants methods have some specific features. Being public and open these rebellions were political actions, different from crime. In spite of the attempt of British officials to portray them as criminals, the rebels mode of action tell another story. For example the Santhals gave ample warning in advance to the villages they attacked. The legitimacy for such public declarations often came from a higher authority. The Santhal leaders Sidho and Kanho for example claimed in fact that it was the 'thakoor' (local god) who himself would fight the white soldiers. It was this public legitimacy which allowed the Rangpur rebellion's leaders to impose a **dhing-kharcha** (levy for insurrection) on the peasantry. The public legitimacy ultimately allowed public conference, planning, assembly and attack. As Sido Santhal put it "all the pergunnait and manjees consulted and advised me to fight". Similarly the legitimacy to fight expressed itself in the grand ceremonies of a rebel march. For example the leaders of the Santhal rebellion were carried in a palanquin and their followers wore festive red clothes. Then the public character was reinforced by drawing on the corporate labour activity. For example the Santhal tribals for whom **shikar** or hunting was the main community activity for obtaining food, often characterised a rebellion as a **shikar**. But now the shikar gathering was used for wilder political purposes and this was reflected in activities like burning, wrecking and destruction of identified targets to make a political point.

What was the underlying bond uniting the rebels against the perceived enemy? These often existed in varying degrees of tensions between class, caste or ethnic and religious groups. In Mapilla rebellion for example religion forged a bond between the poorer and more affluent sections of the peasantry to create grounds for a fight against landlord oppression. Similarly ethnicity created bonds of solidarity. For example in 1852 the Dhangar Kols of Sonepur who were the first to rise in that region were promptly given support by the Larka Kols of Singhbhum where no disturbances had yet taken place. Solidarity in the protests above was reinforced by community

mobilization, forcing the vacillators to join the rebel ranks and a harsh attitude towards the traitors.

Protest movements of the oppressed peasants and tribals did not emerge in a full-blows form. In the early stages they are form of social action which the state many look upon as plain crime. Most often in the British official records this transition from crime to rebellion is ignored and the two are seen as the same. Also obscured is the fact that crimes ranging from starvation, thefts to murder spring from the violent conditions of living in the countryside. Often an insurgency was preceded by the rise in the rate of rural crimes. For example in 1854, a year before the Santhal rebellion, a number of dacoities were committed against the local money-lenders. The Santhal leaders later justified them on moral grounds to the British court saying that their complaints against the money-lenders were never heeded by the officials.

The regional spread of rebellions of tribal and peasant communities was influenced, if not determined, by that community's perception of the region they belonged to, the geographical boundaries within which that community lived and worked as also the ties of ethnicity. For the Santhals it was a battle for their 'fatherland' which had been grabbed by the outsiders. Their fight then was for this land which belonged to them in the good old past and was now snatched away from them. Sometime ethnic bonds extended the territorial limits of a tribal group as we saw in the case of Larka and Dhangar Kols who came together in rebellion.

Likewise the peasants and tribal people's conception of their past went into the making of the consciousness of the rebellious and the insurgent. We have already seen that their notions of their own past inspired rebels to struggle to recover conditions that prevailed before they fell upon bad times, before their oppressors acquired domination over them. The Faraizi and Santhal rebellions provide particularly apt examples. This did not necessarily mean that the protest movements were backward looking; it represents an effort to construct an ideal to strive for.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write five lines on the nature of the leadership in the movement, described above.

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- 2) Do the peasant and tribal movements of our period demonstrate certain level of consciousness? How?

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29.5 LET US SUM UP

It has been argued that the peasant and tribal movements we have briefly surveyed above were highly localized and isolated. While many of these movements drew strength from ethnic or religious ties, that fact itself became a constraint. Their isolation, due to failure to develop a higher order of integrating consciousness, limited the impact of these movements at the national level. The isolated nature of these episodes of rebellion, besides the technical superiority of the British armed forces and the law and order machinery supporting the established social order, ensured British success. Nevertheless, as the first expression of the protest of the oppressed in the colonial period, these movements are highly significant. At the end of the period you have studied the revolt of 1857 marked a watershed. It was a movement which was fuelled by peasant discontent under British rule as well as the reaction of some other sections of society against British rule; it cut across ethnic and religious and caste boundaries; and it posed a real challenge to British Raj in many parts of India simultaneously. We shall study this revolt of 1857 in the next two Units.

29.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 29.2
- 2) See Sub-sec. 29.3.6

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 29.4.1
- 2) See Sub-sec. 29.4.2